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SUBJECT: BURKINA FASO CELEBRATES NATIONAL DAY IN GRAND STYLE FOR THE FIRST TIME IN 27 YEARS, HIGHLIGHTING COMPAORE'S STRONG GRIP ON POWER

Reftel: Ouagadougou 857

1. (U) Key Points:

-- On December 11, Burkina Faso held an elaborate celebration marking the 47th anniversary of its 1960 independence from France. The festivities included a Presidential address and a huge parade involving around 7,000 participants from Burkina Faso, including the entire U.S.-trained "Laafi" peacekeeping battalion, as well as military personnel from five neighboring countries.

-- The festivities marked the first time in 27 years that Burkina Faso has celebrated its independence with fanfare, and was also the first time since President Compaore came to power in a coup d'etat 20 years ago that he and his family appeared together in public before a large civilian-military gathering.

2. (SBU) Key Judgments:

-- Compaore's decision to hold large national day festivities reflects his increased confidence in his grip on power. It also further bolstered his political position by building pride among the Burkinabe military, and appealing to the patriotism of a citizenry that might have otherwise focused on the December 13th, 9th anniversary of the death of cause celebre journalist Norbert Zongo.

-- The festivities came less than two months after October 15th celebrations marking Compaore's 20th anniversary in power that were more contentious since they also marked the 20th anniversary of the murder of his former friend and predecessor as President, Thomas Sankara (reftel).

-- The presence of soldiers from five neighboring countries highlighted Compaore's regional leadership, including in peace mediation in Cote d'Ivoire and his current Presidency of the Economic Community of West African States and West African Economic and Monetary Union.

PRESIDENT COMPAORE ADDRESSES THE NATION

3. (U) In a televised address to the nation on December 10 that kicked off the celebrations, President Compaore outlined his regime's positive political, economic, social, and cultural performance. In defending his record, Compaore stated that Burkina Faso had enjoyed free and fair elections, well-run governmental institutions, greater involvement of civil society in the political process, and significant improvements in human rights. He also said that, for the last decade Burkina Faso had experienced great political stability and economic growth despite a decrease in cotton prices and an increase in oil prices.

ELABORATE CELEBRATION

4. (U) The government of Burkina Faso earmarked 500 million CFA (about 100,000 USD) to fund the National Day celebration this year, according to press reports. The parade, which was the focal point

of the national day celebrations, began with music from the Burkinabe military band and an overhead Air Force helicopter towing a weighted Burkinabe flag. For the first time since he first came to power in October 1987, President Compaore and his family appeared together in public before the large civilian-military gathering. Around 7,000 people marched in the parade, including 425 foreign military personnel from neighboring Benin, Cote d'Ivoire, Mali, Niger, and Togo.

¶5. (U) President Compaore reviewed the troops in a procession that included:

- the entire ACOTA-trained "Laafi" battalion;
- almost all GOBF ground forces, driving or towing tanks, armored combat vehicles, land-to-land and land-to-air missiles, and transmission/communication equipment; and;
- flyovers by Burkinabe Air Force aircraft including two Russian-made Mi-24 Hind helicopters.

¶6. (U) The three-and-a-half hour extravaganza was so lengthy that it seemed as if every military vehicle, commercial tractor, and mobile heavy machine available in the country had participated. There were also marchers representing various government security and civilian agencies including the gendarmerie, national police, fire and rescue, and even the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Regional Integration.

JACKSON